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THE COMMON SENSE OF MYTH

By A. M. HOCART

THE mythopeic man is not yet dead. He is still commonly resuscitated as a mode of explanation. It is necessary therefore to examine his claims to continued recognition. If he has none, the sooner we do away with him the better.

In the first place what evidence is there for his existence? Has he ever been seen, or are there any documents proving his existence in the past? True, in history, as in science, it is necessary sometimes to go beyond one's evidence. Hypotheses are a necessity; without them no progress would be possible; but they should be used with caution and not without good reason. They are the bank notes of science; mere temporary substitutes for the real thing, issued only for convenience, and not to be multiplied beyond need, or they lose all value. We will not quarrel with any man for postulating a mythopeic man with a mind differently constituted from ours, if, firstly, he remembers throughout that it is a hypothesis to be proved; if, secondly, he can show that some such hypothesis is required; if, thirdly, it helps us to understand the facts.

The first condition is not fulfilled: mythopeic man was no sooner imagined than he was promoted to the position of a dogma without ever passing a period of probation as a hypothesis. We are not told what kind of being we should require in order to explain certain phenomena; we are informed that such a man did exist (exactly when or where is not specified), and mythologists proceed

not to deduce by argument, but to state as facts all his little habits and tricks of thought as if they had met him in flesh and blood. They lay down that he was addicted to composing poetry about the sun, moon, and the dawn; that he had a curious twist for hiding the most commonplace truth under piles of metaphors; that to him the sky meant "not an airy, infinite, radiant vault, but a person, and most likely, a savage person;" and so on and so forth. So completely is the hypothetical nature of all this lost sight of that the mythologist never stops for proof; to him it is all fact.

Is the second condition fulfilled? Is it a necessary hypothesis? It might be if we had first tried what we could do with plain, normal, everyday man, as you and I know him, and had failed to reconcile the peculiarities of myth with his known idiosyncrasies; if there was an element in myths that simply could not by any manner of means be deduced from the psychology of *Homo sapiens*, but absolutely compelled us to postulate a mind different in its workings, to be called the mythopeic mind. But as a matter of fact we have never given Brown, Jones, and Smith a chance of showing what they could do. Mythopeic man is called in at every turn. Who believed the Pleiades were seven maidens? Mythopeic man. Who traced the wanderings of Herakles? Mythopeic man. And never a question whether Brown, Jones, or Smith might not have produced exactly the same result. Yet they have given and are still giving us plenty of proofs of their ability to do so, if only we would look down from the clouds upon them. There is the Carolingian cycle: we know the real Charlemagne and his peers on whom these myths were based; we have the successive developments of the myths; we have much information about the Franks who composed those myths, and we have no reason to believe that they differed much from their commonplace descendants. Later there is the legend of St. Francis of Assisi, to mention one in a hundred; nothing we hear about his followers justifies us in assigning to them a mind different from that of the modern Italian. Yesterday's historians believed in events which to-day's reject as myths. If then Everyman can create myths we have no reason

to postulate a special mythopeic man to account for ancient and savage myths.

In the third place does the hypothesis of a mythopeic man explain anything? To explain anything we must have definite laws. You cannot explain the physical phenomena unless you have absolute uniformity of nature. Neither can you explain psychological phenomena unless mind is subject to unvarying laws. To deduce the peculiarities of myths from the minds of their makers, or to deduce the mind of the myth-maker from the myth we must agree that his mind worked according to definite laws. And then we are no better off than we were before, because mythopeic man was invented precisely to account for the apparent absurdities and vagaries of myths. He was only invented because it seemed impossible that such seemingly strange productions should emanate from a logical brain; so they are all put down to the erratic workings of a mythopeic mind dominated by an incalculable element called fancy. That is to give up all explanation; it is to strike at the root of all science by admitting that there is such a thing as chance or caprice. We gain nothing by introducing mythopeic man into anthropology, since he merely represents an attempt to evade explanation by falling back upon the absence of laws. If mythopeic man is to explain anything he must be subject to definite laws which have to be worked out by as patient research and as exact methods as if we were working at the mind of workaday human beings. It is simpler therefore to assume that myths are the creation of commonplace men, to work upon this assumption, and only to give it up when we have found it will not work.

We cannot hope for success unless we are prepared to do more than mere guesswork. We must brace ourselves for as patient research as we are wont to require in Egyptology, Assyriology, or any such discipline. But patient research alone will not do it if the point of view is too narrow. So long as an anthropologist imagines that he can confine his interest entirely to myth, or religion, so long will he be confined to absolute sterility. Our classifications into technology, social organization, religion, magic and so forth are purely artificial; they may suit more or less the

civilization of European townsfolk, though even they do not keep them strictly apart; but these distinctions are quite illegitimate when applied to other races who group their elements of culture in a quite different manner and from an utterly different point of view. So long therefore as an anthropologist confines himself to one of these departments his material will be a useless congeries of facts because the key to nine-tenths lies outside his own province. One half of a custom will lie within religion, the other within social organization; a myth will have some of its roots in technology, others in religion, others in something which we do not know how to classify. If we cast our net wide enough to embrace the whole culture the clues required to explain a myth will find it hard to escape us. Of this I will give an example without further ado.

A very common type of myth in Fiji explains the name or features of an island or piece of land by the fact that the divine ancestor or god brought it from some other place. I will give one specimen from Fiji.

The island of Kambara is little more than a rocky plateau; it is mostly barren, save for one small area of good soil where all the planting is done. The island abounds in a tree called *vesi* (*Azfaelia bijuga*) which is highly prized in Fiji as timber. These peculiarities are accounted for by the following myth:—

There was a spirit called Mberewalaki, the god¹ of Kambara. He went to Oloi, a village of Viti Levu, to beg for soil to bring to his own island. He got soil and besides a *vesi* tree which he intended to use as digging stick when he began to plant in the soil he was taking home. He brought these home, and returned to Oloi for a second lot. As he was approaching Kambara on his way back he found that the people were baking the soil he had brought home on his first journey. He was standing on the reef when he saw the smoke go up. He flew into a passion and hurled the soil at Kambara so that it fell any how, all in a heap, instead of being laid out properly.

The mythologist as a rule dismisses such a myth with the remark that it is etiological. If he means by that that it is used to explain why Kambara has little good soil but plenty of *vesi*, the myth is etiological; but that does not explain the origin of the myth. If by etiological he means that it was invented to explain these facts,

¹ Vu: ancestor spirit or divine ancestor.

we demur. It does not follow because a theory explains certain facts that it was invented to explain them; it is quite possible that the theory already existed and was merely applied to new facts, or to facts that had not attracted attention before. This is an everyday occurrence in science; new phenomena are brought into relation with old theories, and if the theories do not fit they are slightly modified. We have no reason to think that other races in the world proceed otherwise, direct observation is all against it. Until it has been proved that their ways of thought are entirely different from ours, we must assume they are not and work on that assumption till we find it unworkable. What should *we* do if we had to account for the geology of Kambara? Should we simply sit down and let our fancy play about the subject, and dream out some theory? If we were to do that there would be no end to the theories we might think of: we might imagine that the soil had been let down from heaven, as the Rotumans believe of a certain rock in their island; it might be the decayed body of some monstrous animal; or a great tidal wave might have washed the soil off the island except at one spot; or that soil might be a certain kind of rock decomposed; etc., etc. We should have an indefinite number of explanations, and no means of deciding which is the right one: there would be nothing to determine us one way or the other. That is not the way we do: we assume existing geological theories to be true, and approach the island of Kambara from the point of view of these theories. Straightway all these endless creations of fancy are struck off the list as quite impossible, and we are left with a few alternatives, which a careful examination ultimately reduces to one. In explaining things we are simply driven to certain conclusions by our preconceptions and the facts they work upon. Why should it be otherwise with Fijians? If they think like us what will they do when they begin to take an interest in the physical peculiarities of their island? They will approach the problem from the point of view of their own preconceptions which are different from ours and therefore the result will be different from ours. They take interest in matters purely physical; their physics reduces itself to a few theories about the action of heat and

cold on yams, and signs of the weather. These can throw no light on the geology of Kambara. It is human interests that are most developed. Their culture is almost entirely what we should call the humanities; that is history and custom, together with an elaborate theory of ghosts, spirits, incarnation, and so forth. It is therefore to human agency and to history that they will most readily look for the reason why there is so little good soil in Kambara and why so many *vesi* trees. We must therefore turn to their customs if we hope to understand their solution of the problem. An all-round study of their language, social organization, and religion reveals the following facts.

There is no proper word in Fijian "to create"; the nearest equivalent is the word *mbuli* which means "to form," "to shape," "to fashion," "to make into a heap." The word is also used of installing a chief. For our word "creation" they use *veimbuli* which also means the installation of a chief. Each tribe inland in Viti Levu has a tradition of a real installation that took place in a certain spot; at this ceremony they piled up earth to make the sacred foundation of the tribe, that is the foundation of the chief's or the god's house, it does not matter which, since the chief is a god.¹ A kava ceremony was also held in which the chief drank first, then the heads of clans. The effect of the ceremony appears to have been to install the chief as the representative of the god. When he died he was buried in the foundation. When the people migrated they dug up some of this soil and carried it with them to their new home,² where they proceeded "to shape it" (*mbulia*). You can still see at the present day the mounds thus "shaped" by the people of Ovalau in a certain place called "The Carried Earth"³ on that account. They did not only carry the sacred earth, but also their tribal tree⁴ to plant in their new home. In the interior of Viti Levu these ceremonies only took place once when the people

¹ I have set forth the evidence for this in a paper on "Chieftainship and the Sister's Son in the Pacific," *American Anthropologist*, N.S., Vol. 17, 631-646 (1915).

² Legend of Vunanggumu, MS. version. They called the soil "the soil of our sustenance" (*nggele ni keitou kakana*).

³ Nanggelandretaki.

⁴ J. de Marzan: "Histoire de la tribu de Vunanggumu," *Anthropos*, 1913, VIII, p. 880.

decided to have a sacred chief; but they still go on at the present day in Vanua Levu where they are called *mbuli vanua* or *tuli vanua* that is "fashioning the land." It is not clear whether the sacred land in Vanua Levu was the foundation of a house; but chiefs were buried in that land. In Vanua Levu these ceremonies are performed when the crops are bad; they are in a sense therefore a process of recreating the land.

In the light of this new knowledge the legend of Kambara becomes a plain statement of fact. Mberewalaki did bring soil from Oloi in Viti Levu, the sacred soil. He also brought thence a *vesi* tree as the tribal tree. He is called a god because chiefs were gods. The legend is confirmed by the close relationship existing to the present day between Kambara and Oloi.¹ The Kambara people also claim to come from Viti Levu.²

It is significant that legends of this type are only found where the custom of carrying the sacred soil on migrations has been forgotten. The myth could hardly arise where the nature and meaning of the custom is still known.

The conclusion is that the Kambara myth is a genuine bit of history; and it was used to explain certain features of the island, not expressly invented for that purpose. The tendency to explain the topography, fauna, and flora of a place by the action of the divine ancestor did not originate in Fiji, for it is very widespread, covering the whole of the Pacific. It is evident therefore that it originated outside and was brought into the Pacific where it received numerous local applications; men resorted to this theory on every occasion, just as ten or twenty years ago we saw evolution and natural selection everywhere.³ Local circumstances have given

¹ They are *lawvu*, that is "cross-cousins." *Journal Royal Anthropological Institute*, XLIII, p. 101.

² The legend of Mberewalaki says, not that he came from Oloi, but that he went there to get soil. There is no inconsistency: it is quite possible he should have gone back to their original home to get some of the sacred soil. Fijians always look back to their "sacred foundation" whence they migrated. In Vanua Levu they *renew* the "shaping of the land" if anything goes wrong.

³ Cp. R. H. Lowie, "Ceremonialism in North America," *American Anthropologist*, N.S., Vol. 16 (1914), p. 619. "Whenever such an idea is generally adopted within a tribe, it tends to assume the character of a norm that determines and restricts subsequent thought and achievement."

rise to local varieties of the theory that the divine ancestor is responsible for the topography of a place: in Polynesia he is supposed to have fished up the islands; in Fiji and Rotuma he is supposed to have brought the earth in baskets because it was the custom to carry about the sacred soil.

To us Europeans, who have our heads full of geological and biological preconceptions, it may seem impossible that rational beings should hold such theories. We are so used to our preconceptions that we think them self-evident and do not realize what centuries of tradition they represent. Banish those traditions from our mind and what is there impossible in a divine ancestor carrying tons of earth across the sea? There is nothing irrational about it; if a chief is endowed, like the Fijian and Polynesian chief, with miraculous power, *mana*, there is no limit to what he can do. Personal agency is still a favorite mode of explanation in Fiji; it is still suggested at times that the gods or ancestors caused this or that feature of the land, but these suggestions are advanced as cautiously as an unsupported hypothesis by a modern scientist; the author of them is fully aware that there is no evidence for them, and they die without passing into myth because tradition gives no warrant for them.

Let us pass to another myth of the same type.

The Rotumans relate that Raho embarked with his people in Samoa, taking with him two baskets of sand. They sailed westward till it seemed good to them to stop. They then began strewing the sand to make an island; but reflecting that they were too near the setting sun where cannibals live, they moved eastward leaving an unfinished island, the present reef of Vaimoan. The second time they made Rotuma, but as some of the sand had been wasted at Vaimoan they had only enough for a small island.

If this is an etiological myth it is a bad one, for Rotuma is not a bit sandy; it has beautiful black soil. But if we examine the myth in the light of installation ceremonies, this detail becomes quite logical. We saw that the sacred land in Fiji was the burial place of chiefs; there they bury in earth; but in Rotuma they bury in sand; they are most particular about it, and one objection a Rotuman has to dying abroad is that he would be buried in dirty earth. It is quite consistent therefore that they should carry sand about

as the sacred soil, not earth. This interpretation of the legend is confirmed by two memorials; one is a large rock on the beach where Raho first landed and on which he and his people are said to have made kava (we saw that kava was part of installation ceremonies); the second is a circular foundation close by, which was said to have been erected by them and which is sacred¹ (we saw that sacred foundations were set up at installations). We are further told that they did appoint a *Tuit e Rotuma*, or Lord of Rotuma. Putting all this together we may conclude that this is another case of "shaping the land." The sacred chieftainship in Rotuma has decayed till it has become a six-monthly office; and with it naturally decayed the whole of the theory upon which these "shapings of the land" were founded. It is only natural we should find the myth where the custom is lost.

Our own folklore supplies definite proof that an "etiological" myth is not necessarily invented to explain a thing, but may be a historical fact which suggested an explanation. In Shropshire and Oxfordshire "the dark marks across the shoulders of a donkey are said to be the sign of the cross imprinted in remembrance of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem."²

Another class of legends is common roundabout Fiji. It tells of great competitions between the natives of some place and a party of visitors; the life of the defeated is at the mercy of the victors. These competitions always include an eating contest; each side is bound to eat all that the other provides and leave nothing over under forfeit of life. "That is a very common motive in fairy tales," you may say. "It is just the kind of thing a story teller would imagine to interest his hearers." But that is explaining nothing at all, and we want an explanation. It is perfectly obvious to any one who reads these legends that there is a historical foundation for them. I was long puzzled by them, and it is indeed only recently that I discovered the key in the Government Gazette for Fijians. Before quoting the writer, a native Fijian, I must

¹ A storekeeper has now set up his house upon it; but the natives were sure he would die.

² Mrs. E. M. Wright, *Rustic Speech and Folk-Lore*, p. 227.

explain the custom of *veitambani*: it is a variety of *tauvu* which I have already mentioned. *Veitambani* are intermarrying tribes or clans; the word means "related as one half to the other;" we might say they are moieties to one another. Like *tauvu*, *veitambani* abuse and plunder one another, but there are some other features:—

"*Tauvu* is one thing, *veitambani* another," says our writer, "*veitambani* are lands that vie with one another; it is a disgrace for them that the report should go that they have been overwhelmed or weak in war, or in exchanges, or in eating, or in drinking. It is better they should die in battle than run away, it is better that they should be poor than that their contribution of stuff to the exchange should be small, it is better that their bellies should burst and their stomachs be rent than that food and water should be left; it must all be eaten up."

One of these tales is about ten brothers who go to Tonga to marry ten sisters; therefore they and the Tongans with whom they hold a contest stand in the relation of *veitambani*, or intermarrying tribes.

We are all familiar with those fairy tales in which a king's daughter will not laugh, so her father, the king, promises big rewards to whosoever makes her laugh. We read that the Alaskan Eskimo on the first day of their inviting-in feast hold comic dances, and "if, during the day's dances, the home tribe can succeed in making the visitors laugh, they can ask of them anything they wish."² I do not wish to argue that these tales are derived from this Eskimo feast; it is a long way from Alaska to Europe. There is nothing impossible in a tale spreading all that distance, but there is no proof that it did. Here we have the difference between suggestion and proof; in our former cases we had all the connecting links; here we have none; we have merely a possibility that this custom and these tales have a common origin; it is a clue to follow up, a hypothesis to work upon. I will just point out that the custom may be fairly widespread: in Rotuma at the making of a state mat the women seize men as prisoners and keep them till they are ransomed, but if one can make them laugh he must be set free.

¹ *Na Mata* (1896), p. 172.

² The "Inviting-in Feast of the Alaskan Eskimo," by E. W. Hawkes, *Geological Survey of Canada*, Memoir 45, p. 12.

Of course they try hard not to laugh. Again this custom may have no connection with the Eskimoan; we lack evidence, but it is something to know that we lack it because then we shall seek for it.

It has been suggested by an American writer that the ordeals that occur in American tales are derived from the ordeals of initiation ceremonies. Unfortunately I have lost the reference and so cannot do justice to the writer.

I now come to a famous myth, that of Joshua stopping the sun. Biblical critics have suggested that this was originally a poetic metaphor which was later mistaken for literal truth. Unfortunately no evidence is adduced that metaphors ever do become myths; it is not impossible: in our present state of knowledge we cannot say that anything is impossible; but it does not seem very probable, and until a well-authenticated instance has been produced I find it easier to believe that Joshua did actually stop the sun. In the island of Lakemba, Fiji, there is a clump of reeds called "knotted reeds;" the belated traveller who passed that way would sign to the setting sun as if calling him, the word for this gesture being *yalovaki*, which is derived from *yalo*, "shadow," "image," "soul;" he then took a reed, made a knot in it, and held it fast till he got to the village; the night would not come on until, arrived at his destination, he threw the reed away. The idea seems to be that he had secured the shadow of the sun and tied it up in the reed. Again it is a far cry from Fiji to Palestine, and this is only meant as a suggestion, but it is not an absurd one. The idea that you can stop the sun is evidently a widespread one. In Rhodesia they "put a stone between the branch and stem of a tree to ensure reaching one's destination before sundown" and this is also done 2,000 miles to the north.¹ A belief that is found at three points so distant from one another is sure to be found in many other places; it is therefore *possible* that Joshua did stop the sun.

A notable example of a custom explaining a myth is the killing of the divine king. It is all the more notable as the custom was postulated to explain the myth, and was subsequently discovered as a fact. We cannot be far wrong therefore if we follow a clue which

¹ *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. XXXIX (1909), p. 532.

in one case at least has given such brilliant results and has achieved the highest ambition of science, which is prediction. It is not every myth however that will yield its own explanation, nor every man that can extract it. Most collections of myths are therefore condemned to remain absolutely barren until quickened by a knowledge of arts, customs, and beliefs.

In bringing forward these myths I have no intention to suggest that all myths are custom misunderstood. I have no wish to add another hasty generalization to the swarms that infest anthropology. I have merely wished to show that if, instead of merely skimming through a myth, guessing its origin, and passing on to another, we make a systematic investigation of a region, leaving nothing untouched, despising no trifle, myths will explain themselves without any coaxing, and will spontaneously reduce themselves into common sense. It so happens that the myths we chose for illustration are partly based on old forgotten customs; in such a small collection this may well be a coincidence. As it is we have one, the origin of the ass's marks, which cannot be described as a misunderstood custom. In dealing with a myth we may use our previous experience as guide, but in the end each one must be judged on the merits of its own evidence. So long as the mythologist is content with taking myths in isolation and constructing a rationalized version out of his own head he can never get any further. There are so many possible ways of rationalizing a myth according to the temperament, bias, nationality, and age of the mythologist; but each of these remains a bare possibility with no power to convince any one. The truth may be very different from what we all expected, and that is only to be attained by a systematic study of the whole culture to which the myth belongs, together with neighboring cultures. Then the facts will force the conclusion on us, not we on the facts.

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